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Watch Out for Fall Driving Hazards

Sure, it's lovely out -- but be aware of the dangers of driving in autumn's quick-changing conditions

During this time of year thoughts turn to colorful fall foliage, cool days, and outdoor festivals to enjoy. We are fortunate to have many scenic roads in our area that highlight the colors of fall. As you take to the highways remember those picture-perfect days have a way of changing quickly during autumn.

Fall weather is often unpredictable and driving conditions can change from perfect to miserable within minutes. Additionally, during fall decreased daylight brought on by a return to Daylight Savings Time means that many of us will be commuting to and from work in darkness. Instead of being one of the better times of the year for driving, fall is actually one of the more treacherous times of the year to be on the highway. Vigilance is required if safety is to be maintained -- and the first place to start is in the driveway, before you hit the road.



Before starting on any trip, it is always a good idea to give your vehicle a pre-drive inspection. Make sure the tires are properly inflated and show plenty of tread, check to see all lights and turn indicators are working properly and make sure the engine has the correct fluid levels.

If you park your car outside, you've probably noticed that a warm body entering a cold car interior causes the windows to fog up. Clear all windows before you leave the driveway by running the defroster on high or wiping off the glass. Clean windows are essential for safety; even a small, fogged quarter window can severely limit visibility, especially when backing out into the street. Fog also tends to form on the exterior mirrors, so wipe those off while the other windows are clearing.

Once out on the highway, it is imperative to pay attention to weather and road conditions. Frosty patches, fog, black ice, rain, hail, sleet and falling leaves all present hazards to the unwary. Here's a checklist of fall driving hazards:

- **Bridges freeze first** – During fall and winter months, bridges can be very dangerous. Because they are exposed to weather on both top and bottom, they will freeze over before the rest of the road, and you may not be able to tell until it is too late. Use caution when transiting from the pavement to a bridge surface by steering smoothly, staying off the throttle and braking gingerly.

- **Frost** – When Jack Frost visits a shady patch of highway around a blind corner, the effects are often deadly. Use caution if your driving route takes you over bridges, down tree-lined streets, or anywhere else shadows cross dew-laden highways.
- **Black ice** – It's called black ice because it is invisible. Black ice usually forms below overpasses, on bridges, in shaded areas and where there is water running across the pavement. It is exceptionally dangerous and a driver who has been driving on clear pavement will be caught unaware. If you live in an area where frost occurs, black ice is always a possibility. Use extreme caution when driving on cold mornings where there is evidence of frozen moisture on the roadway.
- **Rain** – Fall rainstorms often tend to be sudden and heavy. Early fall storms are the worst from a driving perspective because highways that have a summer's worth of oil and rubber buildup from traffic become extremely slick when suddenly soaked. It usually takes a couple of really good downpours to wash this buildup away and in the interim the roadway is especially hazardous. **REMEMBER** – if your windshield wiper blades are in use, so should your headlights!
- **Hydroplaning** -- Hydroplaning happens when excessive water buildup on the highway causes a vehicle to "float" on a layer of water. If you should find yourself hydroplaning, slow down and avoid sudden movements of the wheel and quick stabs of the brake that can make your vehicle spin out of control. In an especially heavy downpour, pull off the road and wait it out.
- **Fog** -- Usually found in low places or areas surrounded by trees, hills or mountains, fog is statistically the single most dangerous condition a driver can encounter. It can severely limit visibility and change your perception of distance. When encountering fog, slow down. There may be a stalled or slow vehicle hidden behind that wall of white. It is also smart to turn on your headlamps (low beam) or fog lamps to increase your visibility and your chances of being seen by other motorists. Most accidents happen in fog because the driver was going too fast for conditions and rear-ended the vehicle ahead. Slow down to a crawl if necessary, keep your lights on and use extreme caution.
- **Leaves** – As the fall season progresses, deciduous trees lose leaves that end up covering residential streets and country roads. While it is fun to blast through those colored leaves layering the highway, bear in mind that leaves can be slippery, especially when wet. Hard acceleration or braking, and sudden turns should be avoided when running over a pile of leaves, as they can lead to skidding. Additionally, like water, leaves often accumulate in low places. There may be a dip, pothole or other road hazard hiding under those leaves covering the roadway.



For additional information contact: Your Unit Safety Representative (USR/ADSO/CDSP), or the 633 ABW Safety Office: LAFB Office @ 764-5058; FEVA Office @ 878-3740 x222.